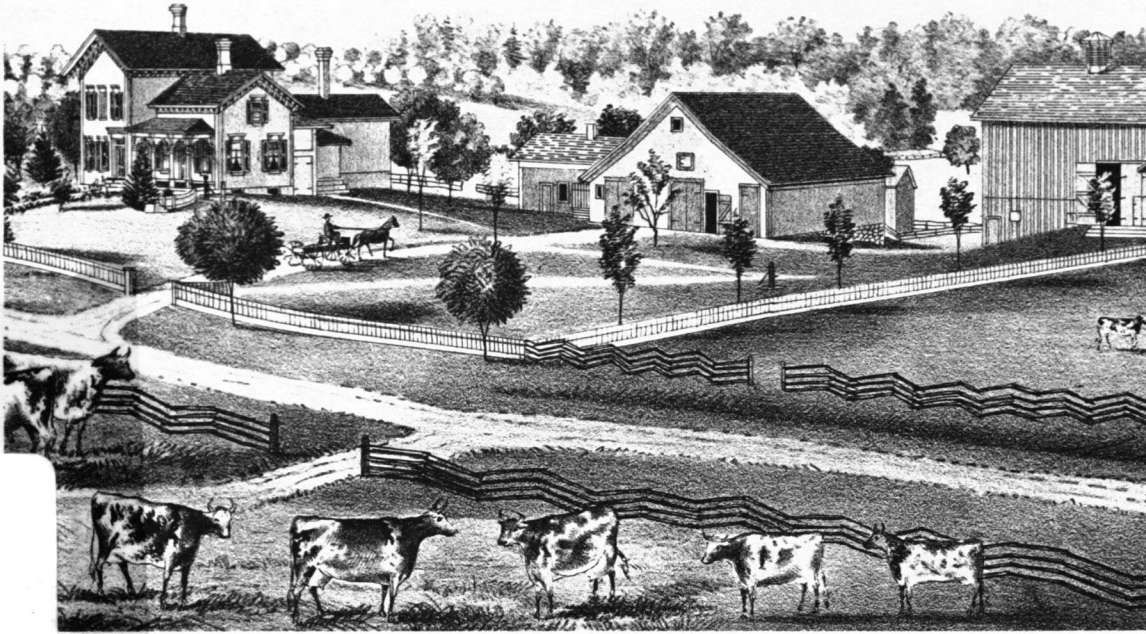


A HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF COLLINS



Ayrshire Stock and Dairy of Issac W. Tanner.

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by Lorna J. Spencer

It is difficult today to picture the area of the Town of Collins as it looked to the first settlers. The welcomed shade of the present trees can only suggest the lighting effect caused by the dense forest of 163 years ago. However, the first white men to enter this part of New York State with the idea of settling were only incidentally interested in the natural growth and climate of this section. Their primary interest was the welfare of the inhabitants of the

recently granted Indian Reservation. The Quaker missionaries, who came from the Alleghany Reservation, were looking for a site on which to establish a mission to educate the Indians in the white man's ways. Jacob Taylor, who was in charge of the group, had 12 years experience among the New York State Indians and seven years on the Alleghany Reservation mission station. As the Quakers had set up mills at that place, he no doubt looked for a site with waterpower potential, adjacent to the Reservation. That his judgement was sound is shown by the fact that an



*Joseph Taylor, Quaker Missionary
to the Seneca Indians.*

1880 map of Collins lists a sawmill and tannery still in use at Taylor's Hollow. Although June 8, 1808, is the date on the contract between the Holland Land Company and Jacob Taylor, as agent for the Philadelphia Friends Committee, and records show that a house was started during the summer of 1808, the mission group did not take up permanent residence here until spring of 1809.

It seems certain that the reports sent to the Friends Committee by the Western New York missionaries had some influence on the decision of other Quakers looking over the area newly surveyed by the Holland Land Company. Most of the families which came here in the next few years were of Quaker persuasion. Turner Aldrich selected land on both sides of the Cattaraugus Creek, but built his house on the east side, making him the first settler in the southwest corner of the

town. He set up a crude sawmill using the power of Grannis Brook which entered the Cattaraugus on his land. A few years later, he built a gristmill, and the settlement became known as "Aldrich's Mills."

At the same time that Turner Aldrich was clearing land on the southwest side of town, Peter Pratt and his family were settling in the Zoar, or southeast part of town, also along the Cattaraugus Creek. Each week during their first summer, one of the Pratt boys made the 11-mile trip along the Indian trails to Turner Aldrich's clearing and then up to Taylor's Hollow to have their milling done. As there were no settlements between these areas, and the forest was still well populated by wild animals, a good deal of courage was required to carry out the assigned task. Here was real life adventure enough to satisfy any young boy.

The next few years found families coming in increasing numbers to all areas of the town. Although neighbors were sometimes several miles away, roads were being laid out, and there was time to think of things other than the bare necessities of living. Schools were being held in homes or unused buildings. By 1815 schools were in session in at least five neighborhoods. The families at what is now Collins Center apparently were the first to arrange for classes, closely followed by those in Zoar, at Lapham's Mills (now Bagdad), and two near the present line between North Collins and Collins. Some of these classes were held in buildings constructed for the purpose. The few schools organized by 1821 when the Town of Collins was set off from Concord, had multiplied to 29 districts by 1852, when North Collins was separated from Collins, some of them joint districts across town lines. The new



town boundary lines meant a change in district numbers and areas. In 1880 there were 10 school districts known as: Zoar, Scrabble Hill, Poverty Hill, Rosenberg, Collins, Sisson, North (or White), South (Red Schoolhouse), East (of Collins Center), and West. The small schools east and west of Collins Center were united during 1880, but a site for a new building was not selected until 1884. There, a frame building was erected with two classrooms on the first floor, and a classroom, assembly hall, and cloakroom on the second floor. A modern brick building was opened in 1926 with a gymnasium-auditorium added in 1928. This school, with some of the other small districts in the east part of Collins, became part of the Springville Central School system.

The first school in the Village of Collins was built in 1849. This one room building was located on the north side of the main road and is now an attractive home recently remodeled by Delbert Ball. After the railroad reached Collins in 1873, more families settled here resulting in an increased school enrollment. A new school was built in 1887 on a new and larger site on the south side of the road. This two-room building had the lower four grades on the first floor and the upper four on the second floor. When this building burned in 1917, a much larger brick building was constructed on the same site. This had four classrooms on the upper level and two activity rooms and a gymnasium on the lower level. In 1954 when this school district became part of the Gowanda Central School system, the old gymnasium was remodeled into a modern kitchen, and a new multipurpose room and three classrooms were added.

It is said that one of the Aldrich children attended school in Collins Center

in 1811, but soon there were enough children in Aldrich's Mills to warrant a school of their own. At first this was on the east side of the creek, therefore in the Town of Collins. Later it was in the west, or Cattaraugus County, part of the village. This became a joint district with the Town of Perrysburg, later the Town of Persia.

At present, school buildings are maintained in both Collins Center and Collins for the lower grades, but the future looks grim for these small local schools as gradually more and more grades are transferred to the central buildings in Springville and Gowanda.

The early Quaker missionaries maintained schools for the Indian children when teachers were available but the children found it difficult to stay indoors when their previous learning had taken place out of doors. In 1845, Asher and Laura Wright came to the Cattaraugus Reservation after the sale of the Buffalo Reservation closed their mission station there. The Congregational Board had built a mission house for the Wrights, which was soon transferred to the charge of the Presbyterian Mission Board, along with the responsibility of the work being done on the Reservation. When the hard times of 1854 caused extreme poverty and sickness among the Indians, Rev. and Mrs. Wright took 10 children into their home. As this number grew, it became increasingly difficult to supply all their needs. Philip Thomas, a Quaker in Baltimore, heard of their plight and sought funds on their behalf besides giving some of his own money. In June 1856, 50 children were moved into a new building built on a 50 acre tract set aside by the Indian Council for a school and asylum for orphan and destitute children of all the reservations of the state. Mr. Thomas continued to

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use his influence to convince the State to assume financial responsibility for the school, which they did in 1875. At first the school complex consisted of many wooden buildings, but overcrowding made more space necessary, and brick buildings were erected around 1900. In 1905, the old title "Indian Orphan Asylum" was changed to "Thomas Indian School." As conditions improved on the reservations the need for the school diminished, and in 1956 the school was closed. For a few years the Gowanda State Hospital used the buildings as an annex. Now most of the buildings are empty, though a few offices pertaining to the Seneca Nation are located there.

Because these early settlers were for the most part of Quaker background, we can be sure there were "meetings for worship" from the very first. Early Quaker meeting houses were constructed in Bagdad, on Jennings Road south of Route 39, and in the northern part of the town in what is now North Collins. The only Quaker church now active is located in the Village of Collins. It was built in 1888, and the parsonage next to it was built in 1891. Classrooms added at the back of the church in the 1940's proved to be insufficient, and it became necessary to use the parsonage rooms for classes also. The small house next to the early parsonage was bought in the 1950's for the use of the minister.

By the time the Town of Collins was set up and so named, other denominations were holding services, sometimes in private buildings and often in the schoolhouses. In the 1820's there were two groups of Methodists meeting in the Collins Center area. By 1834, they had joined in erecting a building just east of Collins Center. The use of this building was not restricted to



Collins Center Methodist Church, about 1900.

Methodists as they had had to make a general appeal for funds for building. In 1844 the unfinished building was moved across the fields to its present location by the combined efforts of people from miles around. They brought their ox teams and hitched on to the log runners which had been put under the church. In later years the belfry and entrance were added. The basement kitchen and dining facilities were the result of remodeling in 1929. Subsequent remodelings have kept this early building in good condition.

Between 1830 and 1880 three churches were established that no longer serve this area. The Freewill Baptist and the Christian churches were dismantled, but the Universalist Church was later used as a hotel and now belongs to the Grange.

After the split in the Methodist Church in the 1860's, which resulted in the formation of the Free Methodist denomination, a new church was built

on the road going north out of Collins Center. This plain but sturdy building served the congregation from 1865 to 1967 when a new church was erected across the road and to the north. Also on this road is the Catholic Church, organized in March 1955. Mass was held at the Grange hall from June 1955 to December 18, 1955, when the first service was held in their new building. Furnishings were provided by many groups and individuals.

The Collins side of the Village of Gowanda has a Presbyterian Church, organized in July 1827, a Trinity Evangelical and Reformed Church, organized in 1887 as an Evangelical Lutheran Church, and a Catholic Church which has had three buildings over the years, the last one constructed in 1959. The Assembly of God congregation meets in a house which they erected on Allen Street.

Although the Quakers came to teach the Indians, they did not attempt to convert them, so no Quaker meeting houses were ever on the reservation. Later, Presbyterians sponsored workers on the reservation, resulting in the construction of the United Mission Church in 1856-57. Within a few years the Baptists and Methodists also erected buildings there. More recently, buildings were erected by the Episcopalians, Assembly of God, Mormons, and a group incorporated as the Faith Baptist Indian Mission (not connected with the early Baptist church), which is still active.

Some of the early churches had cemeteries nearby. Occasionally a family would set apart a plot of land for its own members. Unfortunately, some of these early sites have become completely obliterated. Others still have a few stones standing, some so worn as to be unreadable. Where possible,

information from these old stones has been copied and put in the town historical collection. At present, only four cemeteries are being used. The "Pine Grove Cemetery" in the old Rosenberg section of town was deeded as a cemetery in 1855 by Stephen Southwick. For many years, its corner was shared with the district school. When the building was closed and moved, more land was available for burial plots. The King family, early settlers in Collins Center, gave the land where the Collins Center Cemetery was started. More land has been added over the years. Mrs. Charles Goodyear of Buffalo, a descendant of an early resident of the town, gave the stone and iron entrance at the east drive of the cemetery. On the hill just east of the Village of Gowanda lie the "Pine Hill" cemetery, on land donated by Joseph Plumb, and the Catholic cemetery, on land bought by Peter Rink for the purpose.

The earliest industries in town were those most needed, the gristmill and the saw mill. Jacob Taylor had both at Taylor's Hollow soon after the missionaries came there. By 1828 there were five gristmills and 11 sawmills in the town. Some mills were equipped to do both sawing and grinding. The tannery was the next most needed shop. Smith Bartlett set up a tannery in 1815. Most of the areas of the town had a tannery at some time. As a general rule, the tanner was also able to make boots and shoes, and harnesses. As time went on, the shoeshops and tanneries became separate businesses. Most of the tanneries were small businesses, but one family of tanners, which started in Taylor's Hollow in the 1850's, eventually built their business into the Moench Tanning Co., located in Gowanda today.

Difficulties in transportation made

iron scarce in the new town but enough was brought in to keep older tools and wagons in good repair and to fashion some new articles. David Atkins and John C. Adams were early blacksmiths in different areas of Collins. Later, David Bartlett had a shop for edge tool manufacturing along Clear Creek near the present railroad bridge in Collins. After the railroad came through in 1873-74, making transportation of raw materials and finished products easier, the Johnson Manufacturing Co. built a factory next to the railroad siding in Collins where copper kitchen utensils, toys and other small metal items were made. This building was destroyed by fire in 1896 and never rebuilt.

Most early families kept a cow or two for their own milk supply. Excess milk was made into butter or cheese. Eventually, the quantity of family-made cheese indicated a need for cheese factories. George Sisson and Enoch Taylor went to the eastern part of the state to learn more about commercial cheese-making. In 1862 they, with Ansel F. Comger and James Wilber, built a factory on what is now North Quaker Street between Route 39 and Lenox Road. Soon cheese factories were built in other areas of the town. Most of these eventually came under the management of William A. Johnson who formed a large combine. After the advent of railroad transportation, Mr. Johnson had a large brick warehouse built next to the tracks in Collins. This provided for apple storage in the basement, cheese curing and storage on the two lower floors and general storage on the third floor. After Mr. Johnson's death in 1881, the business was continued for awhile by his family and others. Later it was sold and the building became a feed mill. By the time the town was 100 years old, most cheese

factories had ceased operation because fluid milk was more easily transported. Several small dairy plants were set up to process milk and make local deliveries. The Wilber Farms Dairy which delivered in Buffalo was later bought by Robert E. Rich and was the beginning of the Jones-Rich Dairy Co. Milk processing at the present time is handled mainly by the O-AT-KA Milk Products Co-op Inc. branch in Collins Center which sells some cream and skim milk wholesale, but specializes in dry milk production for wholesale use, and Farner-Parker Inc. in Gowanda who not only deliver locally, but have branched out as far as Salamanca and make their own ice cream.

Over the years there have been various small industries in the town. At one time the area called "Tubtown" had a factory where local pine trees, some from the Reservation, were made into tubs of various sizes and uses. In Collins Center, A. J. King had a mill where wooden pumps were made. Antone J. Setter made boxes when he ran a mill at Taylor's Hollow, and printers' engraving boards after he moved to a mill in Collins Center. When William Johnson's big warehouse was providing apple storage space, there was an apple drying plant adjacent to the railroad north of the storage building.

Presently the town's industries include the American Wire Tie Co., started by Harry A. Smith in 1935, which manufactures wire ties of various types for many uses. They also construct their own machines for making the ties as well as the tools that are needed when the ties are used. As there are only a few companies in the country making this product, this company's customers range throughout the United States and Canada, and as far as South America.

Dan Gernatt Gravel Products Inc. does a large volume of business in washed sand and gravel, ready-mix concrete and asphalt. Mr. Gernatt started this business in 1955, making use of his gravel farmland, and has continually expanded. The National Sales System Inc. moved to Collins in 1959. This company which was started in 1931 in Gowanda handles special sales of various types in retail stores in 33 states and Canada. After studying the background and financial condition of merchants requesting their services, National Sales personnel formulate plans for advertising and assist in the operation of the sale.

One business needed by the early settlers is still very necessary. Groceries and dry goods alike were carried in stock in the early "general stores." John Hanford had a store in Taylor's Hollow a few years after the mission was started in 1813. Ralph Plumb opened a store on the east side of the creek at Aldrich Mills, by then called Lodi. It is said

there was a store on the corner at Bagdad. Samuel Lake of Springville opened a store in Collins Center in 1830 but hired Harry H. Matteson to run it. This business changed hands every few years for awhile but was never closed out. Just before the turn of the century, the Tarbox family took over the store and continued it until 1957. Mr. Tarbox had earlier in his life clerked for the Mugridge store which was in business from 1864 to 1970. At present Collins Center has no store. Of the two general stores opened in Collins after the railroad spurred the growth of the west section, only one is still open. The modern supermarket chains have made life difficult for a small storekeeper. However, it is interesting to note that the two supermarkets in the Collins side of Gowanda approach the status of the "general store" of old, carrying a wide variety of goods.

In the early days of settlement, the post office was often in the store. Jacob Taylor was the first postmaster in town



Mugridge's Store.

at the office called "Angola," located in Taylor's Hollow. In 1825, an office called Collins was opened on the east side of the Cattaraugus in Lodi. The name was changed to West Lodi when the office was moved across the creek. The name was then used for the office at what is now North Collins, then a part of the Town of Collins. The "Collins Centre" office was opened in 1828 and is still open, with a more modern spelling, having been changed around 1900. The Zoar post office was open from 1826-54. In 1874 the "Collins" office was renamed "North Collins" and Collins was given to the new office opened near the railroad. An early office on the Reservation was called Chief Warrior but existed only from 1848-51. In 1898 the Iroquois office was opened at the Thomas Indian School and continued until the school closed in 1956. The post office at the State Hospital, called Helmuth, was opened in 1923. Dr. William Tod Helmuth had been chairman of the board of managers when the hospital was opened in 1898.

The land for the hospital was purchased from Enoch Taylor by Erie County for a hospital but before they completed plans for it, a State law was passed giving care of the insane into the State's charge. After considering many locations, the State purchased the

County tract. In 1896, a sewer was constructed, necessary steps for a water supply were taken, and buildings were started. The first patients were admitted in the fall of 1898. Buildings were added almost every year at first. In the 1930's six new buildings were added. The last new building, opened in the 1960's, was named for Dr. Earle V. Gray who was in charge of the hospital from 1924-46. Many of the old buildings have been renovated extensively to keep them in serviceable condition. Methods of care and treatment have changed greatly since this hospital was opened. Many more patients are able to return to a normal life. However, those who have been institutionalized for many years need a great deal of rehabilitation before they can be returned to the outside world. The hospital has been an important economic factor in this area, providing lifetime work for some people.

Collins in 1971 is still a small town. Its citizens may find work nearby or commute to the Buffalo area. The children of Village and Reservation alike are educated side by side in our modern schools. Many developments over the years have added comfort and convenience to the lives of Collins residents but the friendliness that helped the early settlers still exists.

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